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TRANSLATION OF TAPED CONVERSATION
WITH GENERAL HERMANN BALCK
13 APRIL 1979

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<p>This is the second of two taped conversations with General Balck. General Balck served as Commander of German Panzer Divisions during World War II.</p> <p>In the question-and-answer session recorded here, General Balck discusses briefly, presentations for the Meuse River crossing, use of air support in the crossing, the French counterattack, defeat of French air counterattack, Dunkirk, blitzkrieg in the Greek mountains, mixed battlegroup concept, Russian psychology and strategy, rear area troops, American tactical system, armored personnel carriers, tactical use of smoke, close contact with forward troops, armor/anti-armor, and a number of other related topics.</p>				
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TRANSLATION OF TAPED CONVERSATION WITH
GENERAL HERMANN BALCK, 13 APRIL 1979

Introductory Note: The following translation attempts to preserve, as accurately as possible, both the detailed content and the style of General Balck's conversation. In the interests of clarity, the questions have been consolidated and condensed; General Balck's answers have been translated in their entirety, with the exception of some digressions and a few anecdotes.

This is the second taped conversation with General Balck. The first, under the title Translation of Taped Conversation With General Balck, 12 January 1979 and Brief Biographical Sketch, was published by Battelle's Columbus Laboratories, Tactical Technology Center, in January, 1979.

Q: During your regiment's crucial assault across the Meuse River at the beginning of the French Campaign, the Luftwaffe Stukas are said to have played an important role. Could you describe the support they provided you?

*Preparations
for the Meuse
River cross-
ing*

A: Let me recount this action quite briefly. We knew in advance that we had to execute the crossing and I had already rehearsed it on the Moselle with my people. During this practice I had a couple of good ideas. First, every machine gun not occupied in the ground action was employed for air defense. Second, every man in the regiment was trained in the use of rubber boats.

*Value of
many-sided
training of
infantry*

When we got to the Meuse, the engineers [to handle the boats] were supposed to be there, to put us across. They never arrived, but the rubber boats were there. So you see, if I hadn't trained my people, the Meuse crossing would have never happened. Which once again leads to the conclusion that the training of the infantryman can never be too many-sided.

By the way, I had a company of engineers from the Gross Deutschland Regiment at the Meuse crossing. I told them,

"Thank God you're here, you can put us across". They said, "We can't, we're assault engineers". I replied, "Assaulting we can do by ourselves -- for that we don't need you."

The operation lay under intense French artillery fire. I had thrust forward to the Meuse with one battalion after some brief fights with the French outposts, and I had set up my regimental command post up front there on the Meuse, along with the forward battalion. I went along with them to make sure that some ass wouldn't suddenly decide to stop on the way.

You know, the essence of the forward command idea is for the leader to be present personally at the critical place. Without that presence, it doesn't work. We'll come back to this subject again.

In any case, when we got to the river, the French artillery began to fire and it was a pretty uncomfortable situation. So I sent a message to Guderian asking for a Stuka attack on the enemy artillery. The air attack came quite quickly, in no more than an hour or so.

*Immediate
request for
air support
of the Meuse
crossing*

Q: That wasn't a pre-arranged attack?

A: No. It was not arranged in advance.

Rehearsal simplifies combat order

As you know, we had rehearsed the overall river crossing operation in Koblenz*. So when we reached the Meuse the only order we got from division was, "Proceed as in the war at Koblenz".

The requested air support is effective

The attacking aircraft went after the French artillery and put it out of action in the blink of an eye. We were very lucky that the French had poor quality divisions at the Meuse. Also, that their camouflage wasn't very good.

The French counterattack with armor

We launched the attack across the river at the same time that the Stukas attacked. Another factor helped us greatly: Many of the French troops were drunk and some couldn't even crawl on all fours. In any case, the attack went relatively smoothly. When the regiment had crossed, we were supposed to wait for our tanks to get across. At this point the French armor counterattacked. It was a

* - The rehearsal was conducted on the Moselle at Koblenz.

critical moment, particularly when we noticed that our 3.7cm anti-tank cannon wouldn't penetrate. My battalions wanted to fall back, but I said "No, you're staying here and the regimental staff will stay here also." So we had to wait to see whether the French or the German tanks would arrive first. Happily, we soon heard motors to our rear and I said, "Here are the German tanks." What did they turn out to be? Two motorized field kitchens!

*Anti-tank guns
defeat French
armor attack*

After a short while, we heard some more rumbling and a platoon of 5cm anti-tank guns from the Gross Deutschland Regiment arrived. These could, in fact, penetrate the French armor. The first went into position and was shot up by a French tank. The second went into action and promptly knocked off five tanks. With that, the French armor attack ceased. In this situation, you just had to hold on stubbornly.

*Balck avoids
holding up
after the
successful
crossing*

We pressed on further all that night but eventually the next morning we had to stop and sleep. When we stopped, I had many of the 200 machine guns in the regiment set up for air defense duties. Soon the French sent in a splendid and very spirited air counterattack. It was just as in earlier wars where the victorious infantry would be

*Ground
machine guns
defeat French
air counter-
attack*

counterattacked by cavalry that had been held in reserve. At any rate, the French pilots flew in close formation barely above the ground. It was almost impossible to miss and our machine guns knocked down most of them in flames. We did have some help from one platoon of light flak. It was a real accomplishment and we suffered not one casualty. Afterwards everything was quiet.

Q: Did the French aircraft attack the bridges or your troops?

A: No, they attacked the troops.

At any rate, I fell asleep and was awakened by my adjutant. He said to me, "Everything has been done in accordance with the order." I asked, "What order?" He said, "The order to thrust forward." I replied, "That's quite a sound order. Who issued it?" My adjutant responded, "Why, you did." I said, "Not a chance." But, in fact, I had issued the order during my sleep.

The attack continued and we ran into a French Spahi brigade. They were the best troops I faced in both wars.

*High praise
of French
Spahi Brigade*

They fought like devils. They had to be dug out of their entrenched positions. The brigade commander and one of the two regimental commanders were killed; the other regimental commander was severely wounded and captured. Only a dozen officers survived; the remainder died.

*Action at
Bouvellemont:
breakout after
the Meuse
crossing*

We pressed on further and reached Bouvellemont*. The decisive breakthrough was made at Bouvellemont. My three battalions had moved up to the village and I gave the order to attack. All my commanders said in unison, "We can't do any more. We're finished." I said, "If you can't do it, I'll do it" and I got up to lead the attack on the defended position. All of a sudden they all joined in; not one left me in the lurch. Then we successfully assaulted the position. The French were again completely drunk.

Q: Why was your attack on Bouvellemont the decisive breakthrough?

A: Because the French had nothing left behind Bouvellemont. Their last reserve was the regiment that had counterattacked us -- the one we had stopped by destroying five of their tanks.**

* - Interviewer's Note: Bouvellemont is about 20 km south-west of Sedan.

** - Balck's real stroke was that he so aggressively pressed forward all night after successfully crossing the Meuse, instead of stopping to rest and consolidate his bridgehead.

*Attack
beyond Meuse
made without
tanks*

Our entire attack beyond the Meuse was made without tanks. We did have three-quarter tracked armored personnel carriers, which were excellent wherever the enemy had no decent anti-tank defenses. I had laid out the equipping of this regiment in accordance with my ideas when I was in the Ministry of War. And surprisingly enough, I had actually been given command of the same regiment. After all, the personnel office didn't always assign people where they belonged. You know, Guderian was given a reserve infantry corps for the Polish campaign. Of course, he raised a terrible commotion and the assignment was changed. Our personnel office was not our greatest strength.

Q: Was your entire regiment motorized and mounted in armored personnel carriers?

*His regi-
ment was
equipped
with armored
personnel
carriers*

A: All three battalions were motorized and all the regiment's riflemen were under armor.

If you're interested, we can continue with some observations on the effects of air. Dunkirk brought out some clear lessons. I pushed forward close to Dunkirk. There we underwent some spirited attacks by British pilots. But they didn't really hold us up.

*Some limits
of air power
revealed at
Dunkirk*

And at Dunkirk our leadership made an enormous error. As you know, the troops were held up and were told that the Luftwaffe would take care of the rest. But, in fact, the air was in no position to accomplish such a task. We had drawn false conclusions from the air attacks in Spain and Sedan *. The British did leave behind their equipment at Dunkirk, but they successfully rescued their men. And with these men they won the Africa campaign. If we had simply pushed forward on the ground, all these men would have ended up in captivity.

Q: Did you have any problems with German air support bombing German troops?

*Accidental
bombing of
friendly
commanders*

A: Yes. At the Sedan breakthrough. Just after we had beaten off the last French tank counterattack, all our regimental commanders were called together to receive orders at a fork in the road. The Luftwaffe attacked right at this point and those present were wiped out. An armored brigade commander and two regimental commanders were killed. At the time this happened, I was still on the way to the meeting.

* - The air attack in support of the Meuse crossing.

Q: Was there any means of radio communication between attack aircraft and the motorized ground units at that time?

A: No. That came later.

Q: Were there any changes in air support procedures or other consequences of this incident at Sedan?

A: The only consequence I know of is that I had to take over an armored brigade.

No immediate changes in air support procedures as a result of the accident

There was no change in air-ground liaison procedures because that sort of thing doesn't happen so fast. To get there lots of people have to change their thinking -- most of them people who don't want to think at all. Many wish to avoid drawing any conclusions at all; they find it easier to say that an accident like that is a unique occurrence.

German air support absent in Greece

Later, in the Greek campaign where I had a panzer regiment, there was essentially no air-ground cooperation. I saw only one Stuka attack. The English air force attacked us courageously and well, but only for the first few days. After that, they disappeared to Crete.

Q: Why didn't the Stukas provide you with more help?

*German air
support - not
much needed*

A: Oh, we didn't really need them much. It went very well without them.

*British miss
crucial air
opportunity
in Greece*

But I am convinced that the English could have completely stopped the German conquest of Greece if they had properly employed their air. The roads were narrow mountain roads filled to overflowing with our columns. By hitting us at the right points they could have caused us boundless losses.

*Blitzkrieg in
the Greek
mountains*

One of the narrowest and toughest spots to get through was the Tempi Gorge.* At this point I had a mixed battle group, one panzer regiment plus an infantry battalion, an artillery battalion and a motorcycle infantry battalion. But I only pushed through the gorge with one tank company and one armored infantry company. Everything else I left outside the gorge because of the threat of artillery coverage down the length of the gorge. After all, the effects of artillery are increased tenfold in rocky mountainous terrain because of the stone fragments. If one went in there with lots of people, the losses would be very high. I went in with only a few and had almost no

* - This is a deep, rocky river gorge of some 20 km length running through the foothills of Mt. Olympus. For an account of this action based on Balck's regimental reports at the time, see pp. 41-44 of Panzer Battles by F.W. Von Mellenthin, copyright 1956 (University of Oklahoma) published in the US by Ballantine Books, 4th Printing: January 1978.

losses. To get through, I had to dress up my tanks for water crossing and I put them across the river like submarines. The British thought it couldn't be done and were astounded when I appeared at the other end of the gorge.

Q: How did you use your motorcycle infantry battalion in this action?

Critical rear attack in mountains made by dismounted motorcycle infantry battalion

A: As soon as they arrived, I took away their motorcycles and used them as mountain troops against the New Zealanders' positions in the hills. After all, I'm an old mountain infantry man myself. I told them, "Don't cross this line. You can cry as much as you like but take the long way around and come from the rear." Just before launching them, I mounted a feint frontal attack with some tanks. Then I brought the motorcycle infantry down into the rear of the New Zealanders and their resistance fell apart.

Q: Do you know when the concept of the mixed battle group (Kampfgruppe) was developed?

A: During the French campaign. The originally developed tactic -- that is, that the tanks attack and the infantry follows to conduct secondary operations or to roll up

*Origins of
the mixed
battlegroup*

something -- this tactic was already abandoned by the end of the Polish campaign. The idea of separate assignments for tanks and infantry was a sin against the essence of tactics: the cooperative employment of all arms against a single point rather than using one arm here and another over there.

Q: When were the first battlegroups formed -- after Sedan?

*Battlegroup
fostered by
Guderian's
organizational
concept*

A: Yes. That happened quite automatically. When I took over the panzer brigade, it had one armored regiment, two infantry battalions and some artillery. In essence, there was the battlegroup, fully formed. That was the great advantage of the original Guderian organization of the armored division: You could use it to continually form battlegroups to suit the need -- here a strong one, there a weak one.

Q: What was the difference between an armored brigade and an armored regiment?

A: At that time, our organization still had an armored brigade with two armored regiments. That was the success of the battlegroup, that you needed only one armored

regiment if you employed all the other necessary arms together in the battlegroup.

Thus, when I took over my brigade after Sedan, the second armored regiment had already been given to another battlegroup. My old infantry regiment was similarly split: My new brigade had one of its battalions; the remaining two infantry battalions were with the other battlegroup.

Q: When you were 6th Army commander in Hungary and Rumania, the Germans apparently were quite strong in armor divisions but weak in infantry. As a result, you could win brilliant tactical victories through maneuver almost every day, but you couldn't retain the terrain. Would you comment on the question of balance between armor and infantry?

Balance between armor and infantry

A: Oh, I think the balance of the peacetime forces was good enough. All we needed to do was to keep them up to strength in war, that was the only little problem!

Q: Did you have this problem of balance in Russia?

*Force ratios
irrelevant
with respect
to the
Russians*

A: The Russian is a unique type. You can risk things with the Russians that you couldn't risk with any other power in the world.

At Budapest, I attacked 45 Russian divisions with about 7 to 9 of my divisions. It worked pretty well. If I had had two more armored divisions, I could have cleaned up the whole Budapest area. But Hitler could never make up his mind to weaken a sector in order to have overwhelming strength at a decisive point.

*Must get
inside Russian
psychology to
come to valid
tactical con-
clusions*

The Russian is passive and slow-moving, terribly slow-moving. You have to get inside the Russian psychology. Then you come to very different conclusions, including tactical ones. When facing the Russian you can't sit down and calculate that he has so and so many divisions or weapons or what not. That's all baloney. You have to attack him instantly and throw him out of his position. He is no match for that.

To discuss the Russian approach, we have to look at not only the last war but earlier wars. We can start with Charles XII of Sweden. He defeated the Russians at Narva, defeated them everywhere. What did the Russians do? They built up an army and trained their commanders and troops in serious warfare. Finally, they reached the point where they were

*Russian
strategy
traditionally
based on
boundless,
expendable man-
power and space*

a match for the Swedes. They could afford the time to do this because they had boundless men and because they could withdraw as far as they wanted to. No one ever reached Moscow without paying a price.

In the Second World War, it was much the same thing. The Russians were unbelievably sluggish and incompetent to employ their overwhelming masses.

*Chir River
example of
Russian psy-
chology and
appropriate
German
counter
tactics*

Here's how it was at the Chir River in front of Stalingrad where I had the 11th Panzer Division. The Russians had their Fifth Tank Army under Koniev. Koniev would launch a tank corps to attempt a breakthrough. He would give the orders on the spot and then move on. So the attack would go in. Naturally, it cut through our thin defenses like a knife through butter. Then the attack would stop; the Russians didn't know what to do next. You had to wait for this moment and then counterattack them immediately. In the blink of an eye they'd be destroyed. In the meanwhile, Koniev would have moved on to the next corps. Same game all over. Attack, etc.. Then they in turn would get wiped out.

In this fashion, with one division I eventually broke up the whole Fifth Tank Army. It was possible to do this only because the Russians hadn't trained their commanders yet. Then in the next year their commanders improved.

They were better selected and received more training and experience. That made things much more difficult for us.

Q: On the Chir you had relatively more infantry than later in Hungary?

A: Not at all. We had far less infantry on the Chir than in Hungary. The people who fought as infantrymen on the Chir were bakers, store keepers, etc.. On that whole long Chir front we had almost no artillery. In such a situation, one must not be misled into tying down a division along such a long front. Instead, one must remain completely mobile and attack wherever it's necessary.

Q: What about reorganizing units after heavy losses?

*Thoughts on
organizing
to replace
losses*

*- the
commander's
reserve*

A: You know, in WWI we already had the so-called commander's reserve. Each unit down to battalion and company level organized such a reserve for itself. For instance, in my Jaeger Regiment 10, we established a commander's reserve for the concluding battles of the war. I belonged to this unit because our commander wanted me held in reserve as his replacement in case he fell. I then selected and held in reserve 5 or 6 of the best people in my company. None of us was allowed to join in. As a result, when the fight-

ing was over and the Alpenkorps* was pulled out, we had enough leaders left to organize around. So we received a few replacements and in the blink of an eye we were in sound shape.

Appropriate organization outweighs numbers of people

It's less a question of the number of people available and more one of having a reasonable organization.

Q: Were you prevented by higher headquarters from extensive reorganizations after heavy losses? Did Hitler refuse to let the German Army eliminate headquarters or major commands, even after they had no assets left?

A: Yes. He had this idiotic idea - he wanted to use these many headquarters for deception. In war you can deceive once, but you can't keep on deceiving with the same ruse -- that will always miss its mark.

Divisions based on inadequate cadre and training are worthless

Hitler was continually setting up new divisions, in order to show how strong he was. These new divisions, even when they were stuffed full of people, were worthless.

* - A mountain infantry corps that Balck's regiment belonged to.

Q: Did division commanders have the freedom to reorganize as they wished?

A: I always reorganized as I pleased. Other division commanders, if they were sound, did the same. Those who didn't were types who were likely to founder -- if not because of poor organization, then for some other reason.

Q: As a division takes heavy losses, do you think it should temporarily reorganize, for example, from three regiments down to two?

A: There's a certain weakness in that approach. I would leave the regiments unchanged as long as possible. It's quite all right to occasionally let a regimental commander stand and fight somewhere with 50 men. The troops do more because of esprit de corps, because they sentimentalize their own regiment. If they get stuck in another regiment, they don't achieve anything. Instead, they keep on saying, "In our old outfit, it was all much nicer."

Q: So does that mean that, instead, the regiments should temporarily consolidate their battalions and companies after heavy losses?

*Value of
unit
identity*

A: Normally, our regimental commanders would leave the companies alone. Often, the companies would be down to one leader and 11 men. That was better than introducing lots of strangers into the company.

*Approach to
combat
leadership*

After all, combat leadership is largely a matter of psychology. As much as possible, I tried not to tell my people what to do. As long as I saw that a man was sound, I let him do things his way, even if I would have done them differently.

Q: What about staffs? Didn't you need to cut them down as the units shrank?

A: By and large, the idea of pulling out excess staff occurred quite naturally. Our people weren't bashful in this regard.

Q: What about combing out the rear area people to get replacements for the front line?

*Rear area
people
unsuited as
combat
replacements*

A: I didn't do it. I generally left it alone because the "hero" of the communications zone is rarely a front line hero. I much prefer one man who fights than ten who look over the situation and then pull out.

*Importance of
infantry train-
ing for rear
area troops*

But I am firmly convinced that all rear area people need to receive thorough infantry training before they are sent out. It can't be done in the war zone. And every rear area column commander needs to be capable of leading his people in a fight.

I remember, as division commander, going to visit some of my rear area units to thank them for a job well done. While there I decided to test them with a few simple combat problems such as taking a house or holding a village perimeter. The results were shocking: People who could do their maintenance or supply tasks perfectly in the midst of the heaviest bombing or artillery attacks failed miserably. They just didn't know anything because they weren't trained.

*- and of equip-
ing them with
light AA and
AT weapons*

Every rear area column needs to have some light anti-aircraft and some light anti-tank weapons. As army commander in Poland, I ordered all the rear area units to organize and train tank-hunting detachments armed just with the "Panzerfaust". Shortly thereafter, the newly-formed detachments from one corps' rear area destroyed 72 Russian tanks in a day.

Q: Did you find that the advent of the "Panzerfaust", which I believe was the first really effective shoulder-fired anti-tank weapon in the war, made a big difference to your infantry?

A: It was a big step forward, but the troops had to be well trained with it first.

*On the
reaction of
troops to
new weapons*

You know, initially the troops are always against every new piece of equipment. "Aw, it causes more work. It has to be carried. We did fine without it." The next thing that happens, the new weapon is packed away with great care -- just where it can't be grabbed when needed.

*- and their
tendency to
stick to what
they have been
trained for*

The tendency of troops to stick to what they're trained for is remarkable. For instance, in the Greek campaign I and my regimental staff ran into a retreating Greek column. They were clearly getting ready to fight. I had with me only the regimental clerk with a sub-machine gun. I told him "Stand here, keep a good lookout and shoot if anyone tries to come through here." "But colonel, I have no sub-machine gun training." I don't know whether he thought I was going to stand there and do it myself. I roared at him till he thought I was the devil himself and then we got on with it.

Another example is from WWI. In those days no light infantryman was trained to throw grenades. Instead, I remember how every evening an engineer with two grenades would report for duty at our position. We'd give him a swig of schnapps, tell him what a great job he was doing, and stick him in the furthest forward foxhole. Then if nothing happened during the night, he'd leave in the morning and report again the next evening for grenade duty.

With this experience of troops pursuing only one skill, as soon as I became commanding general of a division I went to inspect my artillery's abilities. I found not one battery that could serve its machine guns. They were all very carefully packed and put away. So my artillery was given a little extra training!

*Importance
of the ability
to understand
troops - and
to know what
works*

These are all psychological matters; organizing units has to be done by a man who understands troops and who knows what works and what doesn't. Fundamentally, all troops are lazy -- which you can't hold against them. They get run around the countryside enough so that they say, "Here's a little quiet, thank God -- don't tell us about anything, we just want to sleep a little." It's understandable, but it doesn't help.

Q: When the troops got enough training, the "Panzerfaust" worked well?

*High effectiveness of
the Panzer-
faust*

A: It worked brilliantly. There were people who were really sharp with this weapon. It took a while, but eventually the troops had real confidence in the "Panzerfaust".

Of course, there were always people who would let a tank roll over them. When the tank passed, they would jump up and clap a magnetic mine on the back -- gone was another tank. They were fantastic soldiers.

Q: *It has appeared to some that the Eisenhower-Bradley emphasis on phase lines, unit boundaries and "line abreast" advances -- perhaps intended primarily to keep any one ally from getting out ahead of another -- suppressed a good deal of the natural American inventiveness and aggressiveness. As commander of an army group on the Western Front, what was your experience in facing American units?*

*Comments on
the American
tactical
system*

A: Within my zone, the Americans never once exploited a success. Often Von Mellenthin, my chief of staff, and I would stand in front of the map and say, "Patton is helping us; he failed to exploit another success."*

Q: *In fighting the Americans, did you notice the practice of American higher commanders to halt their units at night? Presumably this also meant that these units had to break through a new defensive "crust" every morning at a considerable cost in casualties.*

*Germans benefited from
American
practice of
halting at
night*

A: Certainly. It was a blessing. It gave us all night to build new defenses.

Mistakes like these only underline the absolute need for command from the front in modern warfare.

* - Interviewer's Note: Balck was commander of Army Group G at this time, from 21 Sept to 22 Dec, 1944. During most of this period Patton was under orders not to make a major advance.

Q: What was your view of night assaults as distinguished from movement or infiltration at night?

On night assaults

A: I avoided night assaults, mostly because our people weren't capable of carrying them off. In fact, on the Russian front we fought more at night during WWI than during WWII.

Q: What about attacking in tanks at night?

- and night armor attacks

A: If possible, don't. Our armor people were very much against fighting at night because they could see so little from their vehicles.

Q: Does infantry have a great natural advantage over tanks at night, since they can see better than tanks and can hear the tanks from a great distance?

A: Certainly. That is why my tank commanders refused to attack at night in the Tempi Gorge engagement. They knew they were likely to suffer murderous losses.

Q: How did you control the inevitable tendency of headquarters staffs to grow and grow?

Use of oral orders the most critical factor in limiting staff size

A: The most important thing was that I gave all orders verbally. Even my largest and most important operations orders were verbal. After all there wasn't any need for written orders. As division commander, I forbade the use of written orders within my division.

To lay on a division attack, I preferred to meet my regimental commanders where we could look over the critical sector and have a terrain discussion. At the end of the discussion, I would tell them, "All right, now we'll do thus and such." Those would be my verbal orders for the attack and that was the end of it.

I always prized most highly those commanders that needed to be given the least orders -- those you could discuss the matter with for five minutes and then not worry about them for the next eight days. Manteuffel, who served for quite a while as a division commander in my corps, was one of this type.

Q: About how big was your armored division staff?

*Size of
armored
division
staff*

A: Including staff officers, noncommissioned officers, drivers, radio operators, clerks, etc. -- it was about 50 people. The less there were, the less aggravation.

When I took over Army Group G, the traffic discipline was in terrible shape so I called in the head of the military police for the Army Group. You know what he told me? "I'm only the commander of this unit. I have no staff position so I can't be held responsible."* He was on his way home the next day.

* - Interviewer's Note: It is believed that Balck was referring here to his refusal to have service units commanded via an extra layer of service chiefs on his staff -- a system that requires two levels of staffing -- rather than the unit staff performing both roles.

*Size of Army
Group, Army,
and Corps
staffs*

The staff of Army Group G was about 300 to 400 people, again including all the drivers, radio operators, etc.. The staff at army-level was about the same size while at corps level it was about half that size.

*Some thoughts
on commanding
staffs*

If your predecessor commanding one of these staffs was a bit neglectful, then you could have a major house-cleaning on your hands. However, I rarely found it necessary to get rid of many people. You could pull just one or two ears and get the same effect because, first, word travels like lightning inside a headquarters staff and second, after one or two of these house-cleanings, I had such a terrifying reputation that my reputation alone would have the needed effect.

I also made it a matter of principle to insist on a small table for supper. I ate only with my chief of staff and any newly-assigned officer going to the front or any unit commander coming back from the front. The staff hated this arrangement but, of course, the information I obtained from these officers going to or from the front was invaluable and couldn't be heard anywhere else.

Q: You probably know that Seeborn's radio intercept company under Rommel in North Africa has become quite famous as a result of the African Campaign histories. Did your radio intercept units in Russia and on the Western Front work equally well?

*Effectiveness
of tactical
radio
intercept*

A: We obtained excellent radio intercept information from the Russians -- and equally good information from the Allies. On the Western Front we could get almost no Luftwaffe reconnaissance intelligence, so we were quite dependent on our radio intercept units -- they were able to keep us very well oriented.

Q: How would you compare Model's leadership approach with von Manstein's or von Manteuffel's?

A: Do you know that I had a meeting with Model where I asked him to change because his command techniques were wrong? Of course, he was a very energetic man and had some notable successes. However, his approach was mainly to pump up people to stand fast and to build fortifications wherever he thought someone might attack. His position defense approach was completely opposed to my views on mobile defense. If I have six armored infantry battalions, I won't stick them into the defensive line. I'll hold them in reserve and, when the enemy attacks, I'll use my mobile reserves to throw him out.

*Comments on
the need for
consistency
and steadiness
in the leader*

I had a terrible row with Model. I told him, "It won't work your way. The troops are good. They've always performed as they were supposed to and will continue to do so. But if you constantly push them and shake them up, their nerves will really fail them." The most serious thing

was that Model was always contradicting himself. Today he told his troops this was right; tomorrow the opposite. He lacked the calmness and steadiness that the troops need.

Importance of the Prussian tradition requiring frank criticism by subordinates and forbidding retaliation by superiors

Model listened to everything I said. We both expressed our opinions, shook hands and returned home. He never came to see me again. But every time I got a new assignment, he was one of the first to congratulate me.

That was one of the great Prussian military traditions: you expressed yourself bluntly but you were expected to never resent such blunt criticism.*

Q: What was your view of the tactical importance of smoke?

A: I'd like to describe briefly for you a fight in the northern Caucasus area. One of our armies, the 7th I believe, was pushed back by the Russians and the Russians crossed the Manitsch River. Our army had no luck in trying to throw the Russians back across the river. My division was ordered to clean up this situation.

Example of tactical use of smoke

We first attacked across the river to try to put the whole Russian bridgehead in a sack. It didn't work. So then I

* - Interviewer's Note: Balck was Model's subordinate at the time of the incident he describes.

withdrew my troops and attacked the bridgehead frontally where the Russians had dug in all their tanks. When the Russians noticed this second attack, they were naturally very pleased that I was attacking their strong point. I halted the attack so that they wouldn't realize what I was doing. Of course, the Russians were even more pleased to have successfully blunted this second attack.

At the same time, I laid smoke shells on the first positions I had attacked -- and drove up lots of trucks in the midst of the fog. Simultaneously, I smoked the dug-in tank strongpoint and unexpectedly broke in there using my tanks and one motorcycle infantry battalion. The Russian corps in the bridgehead was completely destroyed. We lost one dead and 14 wounded; the Russians had terrible losses.

*Attack is
much less
costly than
defense*

It's quite remarkable that most people believe that the attack costs more casualties. Don't even think about it; the attack is the least costly operation.

I first saw that clearly in 1914. We attacked an English hill position in northern France. We approached to about 300 meters. The English were just reinforcing to launch some counterattacks as a cover for major withdrawals. The commander of our company in the center said, "If the English reinforce, we're lost -- so we've got to get up the hill before the reinforcements arrive." We blew our signals and launched the attack. The result was that the English were overrun and

thrown out, and the losses were as follows: our light infantry battalion of 310 men buried 30; The English buried 250 men and lost 250 as prisoners. And from the heights we could see the English army in retreat. For an attack under most unfavorable circumstances, these results are typical relative losses for the attack and the defense.

*Why the
defense is
more difficult
and more
costly*

The matter is, after all, mainly psychological. In the attack, there are only 3 or 4 men in the division who carry the attack; all the others just follow behind. In the defense, every man must hold his position alone. He doesn't see his neighbors; he just sees whether something is advancing towards him. He's often not equal to the task. That's why he's easily uprooted. Nothing incurs higher casualties than an unsuccessful defense.

Therefore, attack wherever it is possible. The attack has one disadvantage: all troops and staffs are in movement and have to jump. That's quite tiring. In the defense you can pick a foxhole and catch some sleep.

Q: Did the armored personnel carrier really provide a major advantage over trucks for carrying infantry?

A: Yes. The advantage was tremendous -- above all else, because it pumped up the morale of the troops so much. It also had its disadvantages: If the leaders were foolish, they would fill a whole carrier with troops just to go reconnoiter. It was witless. The first thing I did as

regimental commander was to forbid such nonsense. After all, it was adequate for reconnaissance if two men sat in the carrier. The rest were better off staying home.

Q: Today's armored personnel carriers are quite different insofar as they are now closed on top, allegedly to protect against artillery air bursts. What's your opinion of the closed-in personnel carrier?

*Views on
enclosed
APCs*

A: Low. When the carrier is forced to stop to change over from armored attack to foot-mounted attack, you must be able to jump out immediately. If you are sitting enclosed in armor and have to exit through a door there'll always be a few left inside.

I am against the closed box. What's needed are only armored sides high enough that a man can duck behind them. If this thing runs over a mine, the men inside the closed-in box will be dead.

Q: What measures did you take to secure your headquarters -- to protect against ground or air attack?

A: None. You have to address this problem differently. First you have to understand how the enemy operates. The Russians did as follows. They would attack on a given front. We had a tendency to place our headquarters at a major road intersection behind the center of the front.

The Russians would grab for the intersection and the headquarters and, first thing, we'd lose our command.

*Headquarters
can be secured
only by being
hard to find*

I always placed my headquarters differently: in the middle of a woods, off to one side, etc. Then I distributed my command radios over a wide area and tied them together with a telephone net -- so I couldn't be located by radio direction finders.

*Hq location
in withdrawal*

Above all else, I always tried to pull back my headquarters well before any troop withdrawal, because it is essential for the commander to be reachable during a withdrawal. If you have to intervene personally up front, nowadays you can always get forward quickly. In contrast, most commanders kept their headquarters forward and then, at the decisive moment, lost their staffs, their communications, and the command of their troops.

*Special
importance
of control
during
withdrawal*

It's terribly important to keep the troops under very tight command during withdrawals. But you can do that only if your headquarters is not in motion and is sitting securely to the rear. Here prestige doesn't matter. Most commanders become very involved in such a situation and say, "I'll stay near the troops", but that's wrong in this case. I'm all for forward command, but everything has its limits.

The skill in selecting a headquarters site is this: to select a place such that, when the Russians make a

large-scale enveloping attack, your headquarters is sitting well back and you can calmly take the necessary decisions.

Q: Were any of your headquarters ever hit by air attack, either in Russia or on the Western Front?

*A near miss
on his
headquarters*

A: In Russia, I almost got hit once. I had my corps headquarters near a village. I stepped out of my door one morning, looked around, and said, "You people are out of your minds." Someone had just established an air-field for medical evacuation right next to my headquarters! I said, "This won't take long before it's seen. Move the headquarters immediately." We had just finished moving when the whole village was razed.

In the West, my army group headquarters was first near Strasbourg. But I soon moved because, after every air attack on Strasbourg, my communications wires would be cut. The next location was further north near the old Reich boundary. Although the Allies were constantly searching for that headquarters, they never found it because I scattered my radios so widely.

I experienced the opposite once when a newly organized SS division was assigned to my corps in the fighting near Tarnopol. Of course, this division made every mistake it

*Air attack on
SS division
headquarters*

was possible to make. First of all, they established their headquarters on a main road and concentrated everything they had in that village -- all their radio transmitters and everything. At night I went to see them. During that night 160 bombers attacked us. But it happened only because the radios were right there. The result was that all their communications were destroyed -- all due to the incompetence of the responsible commander. A headquarters has to be scattered so that it can't be found. If one transmitter is found, it has to take a long time to find the next.

Q: In our last conversation, you mentioned an Austrian officer who you said was one of the finest soldiers and best reconnaissance leaders who ever served under you. Could you describe some of the characteristics and tactical ideas that made him so good?

*Description
of an out-
standing
battalion
commander
(motorcycle
infantry)*

A: Yes. That was Baron von Hauser. He was commander of my 11th Panzer Division motorcycle infantry battalion, not my armored reconnaissance battalion. As you know, I dissolved most of my armored reconnaissance units for lack of recon vehicles.

First of all, he really understood how to take care of his people. Time after time at critical moments, I found they had just eaten. To counter the Russian cold, he took

some trucks, installed a little oven in each, and placed them just behind his front. All his troops were rotated periodically to spend a couple of hours warming themselves next to the oven. In the Siberian cold, you have no idea how useful that was.

Next, he had some good ideas for defending against tank attacks. For instance, the danger in a tank attack is that, if you have a long trench line, the tank will place himself over the trench and will fire down the length of your trench. Hauser laid out his trenches in short, irregular zigs and zags. When the Russian tank arrived, our infantrymen could use the cover of the winding trench to get close enough to use magnetic mines or demolitions.

He was a very tough customer and came from an old line of soldiers. When we pulled out of the very heavy battles in the Solzhinitzye Bend, every man in his battalion was in fine fettle while all the other troops had their ears drooping.

Hauser commanded his motorcycle troops in a highly mobile, nimble way. I remember he was defending a very long front. The Russian attacked heavily and Hauser drove quickly around into his rear with his motorcycles and rolled him up.

*Motorcycle
infantry bat-
talion most use-
ful in Russia
as a very mobile
reserve*

In general, the motorcycle battalion was most useful as a very mobile reserve, to attack where it was most necessary or to block an important approach route.

Q: What did the motorcycle infantry have for anti-tank weapons?

*AT armament
of motorcycle
infantry
battalion*

A: I often gave them anti-tank guns from my anti-tank battalion. They also had anti-tank grenades and mines and could handle tanks by themselves. It was a brilliant battalion, due to their commander's spirit.

Q: Can you comment some more on the tactical use of smoke?

*More on
smoke*

A: When you use smoke, the enemy doesn't know whether you're really coming or not -- that's the great strength of smoke. But you have to be very careful not to betray your plans through the use of such means. Otherwise, the enemy will know you're coming. When I used smoke, I always applied some where I didn't intend to attack and thereby pulled the enemy into the position where I wanted him.

On the other hand, I experienced a number of smoke attacks in WWI. One large smoke attack was launched against us by the Italians. When they arrived through the smoke, we only said, "Lay your guns over here, then please march in that direction."

Q: What did you do to control the natural tendency of units to exaggerate reports of enemy losses?

Dealing with the problem of exaggerated reporting of enemy losses

A: I always checked directly on these reports. I would arrive on the spot and say "All right, show me where the 1100 dead are lying. And we'll do some counting." It would turn out to be maybe 50.

But much more difficult and much more serious is the matter of reporting for the distribution of fuel.

and with the problem of under-reporting of fuel status

At one time, I had just gotten a new divisional chief of staff. He came to my commanders' meeting and complained that all fuel reports were being falsified. I interrupted and said "Please be quiet. When the tank regiment reports that they have absolutely no gas and can't move, I know that they have precisely 3 combat hours and 50 kilometers of movement left. When the engineer battalion reports that they have no gas left, I know they mean just that. It took us a lot of effort to calculate this table of correction factors -- please don't mess it up. Just keep on working the way we have been doing it up to now. We know exactly who's lying and who's not and we use that to divide up our fuel."

You know, you have the same problem [of casualty reporting] with tank kills. For instance, 3 anti-tank guns

shoot at a tank and knock him out - each gun reports a kill. Back to the rear comes a report of 3 tanks knocked out. If you add all those kinds of reports together... You have to say, "Where are all these shot-up tanks? I'd like to count them."

To deal with such matters first of all you must understand troops. Secondly, you must be able to get some fun out of these problems. They can only be solved with a touch of humor.

Q: Of course, in a way it's a problem when the troops hide what they have. But it's their ingenuity at finding one more gallon and one more round that often saves the day. Did you find the same problem when your troops were reporting on their ammunition situation?

Close contact with forward troops necessary to assess information

A: Oh, sure after all, you get to know these guys. If you know your people, then you'll know exactly that this one is lying by 50%, that one is not lying at all, and this one over here is understating. You can only figure these things out if you work closely with the troops. Therefore, keep on going forward to see them, listen to them, and then draw your own conclusions.

With Von Mellenthin I had the following happen. He once said to me that I was moving around too much and breakfasting with the troops too often. I said "Come with me tomorrow and

I'll show you something." We went forward, had a meeting with some front line officers, asked our questions about some relevant matters, and got some answers. So then I said to the officers "Let's go have lunch together." During lunch we asked the same questions and completely different facts came to light. I said to Mellenthin "You see why I go to eat with my people so often? Not because they cook so well, but because that's when I find out the truth."

Q: In our last conversation you explained the concept of infantry, armor, artillery, and anti-armor, or PAK, as the 4 arms that comprised the German armored division. For Americans, the idea of organic anti-tank elements as a separate arm and force -- not as a protective part of the infantry -- suggests a new and intriguing solution to today's anti-tank problems. Who in the German army first developed this concept and when?

Origin of the concept of armor and anti-armor as separate arms

A: Guderian developed the anti-tank idea at the same time that he was developing the idea of the tank. He had matured all these concepts well before 1929.

The Russians were also big in the use of anti-tank units. After all, we spent quite a while teaching them how. They had self-sufficient anti-tank brigades that they employed quite well -- for instance, to strengthen the shoulders of a breakthrough in defense against German flank counterattacks.

You know, Guderian initially wanted to set up an all-armored army. His ideas were too modern to be well received but he fought like crazy for his ideas. He no sooner saw a superior than he already had him gored and was busy shaking him. It's interesting that without his very attractive and very competent wife he would never have succeeded. I always used to say that we would have won the war if Guderian had been permitted to bring his wife along.

Q: In our conversations, we have discussed a number of the ideas fundamental to the German military approach, ideas such as the use of the schwerpunkt as a means of successively decentralizing control from army to platoon, and the critically important tradition of encouraging junior officers to criticize bluntly without fear of reprisal. Is there any important principle you would like to add to the various ones we have already discussed?

A: First and foremost, never follow a rigid scheme. Every situation is different -- no two are the same. Even if they appear to be the same, in one case the troops will be fresh while in another they'll be fatigued. That difference will lead to completely different decisions.

*Importance
of not follow-
ing school
solutions*

I'm against the school approach that says, "In accordance with the ideas of the General Staff, in this situation you must do thus and such." On the contrary, you must proceed

as dictated by the personalities involved and the particulars of the situation. For instance, you are attacking at 7 o'clock in the morning and you have given clear tasks to each of your divisions: this one takes this objective, the next one grabs this, the third one does nothing except to protect the left flank. At the next attack opportunity you may have an almost identical situation, but everything must be changed completely because your most competent division commander has been killed in the meanwhile.

Therefore, one of the first principles has to be: There can be no fixed schemes. Every scheme, every pattern is wrong. No two situations are identical. That is why the study of military history can be extremely dangerous.

Another principle that follows from this is: Never do the same thing twice. Even if something works well for you once, by the second time the enemy will have adapted. So you have to think up something new.

*On military
leadership*

No one thinks of becoming a great painter simply by imitating Michaelangelo. Similarly, you can't become a great military leader just by imitating so and so. It has to come from within. In the last analysis, military command is an art: one man can do it and most will never learn. After all, the world is not full of Raphaels either.